

January 29, 1958

Dr. Harry Eagle
President, Society of American Bacteriologists
National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland

Dear Harry:

I am writing to the subject of the enclosed memorandum on "cosmic microbiology". I am very much afraid that events are moving so fast from fantastic speculation to accomplished facts that microbiology may miss some unique opportunities. Even having thought about this for several weeks, I find it difficult to suppress my own amusement at proposals on 'lunar biology', but a moment's sober reflection, and some glances in the evening skies bring one back to what is today's reality.

Since that memorandum was written, I have read in Science and in the newspapers that the AIBS has opened at least one channel to the missile-ists, and that there is some thought of biological experimentation. What the newspapers have to say about the proposed experiment, the effect of weightlessness on yeast growth, is not very encouraging, but may be misleading. If nothing else, it is obvious that much more detailed information should be made available to microbiologists on proposed experiments for their information, and to elicit their ideas. I myself would suggest, for example, that lysogenic induction would be a far more informative indicator of radiobiological effects that might be telemetered. In any case, the issue developed in the enclosed memorandum is of far greater scope.

My tactical proposal is that the National Academy of Sciences appoint an ad hoc committee on extra-terrestrial microbiology, as its findings would probably be accepted as more authoritative than those of any other scientific group, for the necessary representations to satellite policy-making machinery. It is also obvious that some channel of communication would be needed to the Russians, and recent experience suggests that this could be far more constructive as between the National Academies of Science in Washington and Moscow, than through political or diplomatic channels.

I have already written tentatively to Bronk, some weeks ago, without having had any reply. I think that the SAB could do a great deal to get the matter moving by making a strong representation, through the NRC, on the urgency of the situation. It might also follow Perry Wilson's suggestion of its own ad hoc study committee, but I think it would be wiser to try to get the Academy in motion before multiplying committees.

The enclosed letter has been sent to a number of people, including Dave Goddard, as Chairman of the Botany section of the NAS. It is also going into the SAB newsletter. Dean Cowie, at the Carnegie Institution Dept. Terrestrial Magnetism in Washington is also deeply interested in this-- we are planning to write a joint note for Science that will expand on the memo. I would appreciate your consulting with him on any immediate moves in Washington.

Perry made the obvious point of the analogy between the immediate issue and Antarctic microbiology. We can hope for a more satisfactory outcome on this issue, which is plainly of immeasurably greater importance.

With all best regards,

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Chairman, Department of
Medical Genetics